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Iraqis Trained for Chemical Warfare

Despite the near-hysterical rhetoric emanating from both Iran and Iraq, the desert conflict so far has been less than total war. But U.S. intelligence analysts say there is danger of escalation in a particularly gruesome area: chemical warfare.

The reason chemical or biological weapons have not been used may be simply that the balance of terror in this field is clearly in Iraq's favor, and the Iraqis have been doing well enough with conventional forces—so far. But if the fortunes of war should change dramatically, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein may decide to stave off disaster by resorting to chemical weapons.

Iran has done relatively little to develop chemical warfare capability, or defense against such attacks. But Hussein is known to consider chemicals a useful military tool. Iraq's modest stockpile of chemical-biological weapons is a legacy from its years as a military client of the Soviet Union.

The Iraqis began actively acquiring a chemical warfare potential in the mid-1970s. As a secret Defense Intelligence Agency report put it, Iraq embarked on "an aggressive chemical-biological-radiological program, including the construction of training facilities . . . modeled after Soviet CBR installations."

Intelligence sources discovered "at least 15 locations" in Iraq where CBR obstacle courses had been constructed with Russian help. The extent of

these training facilities "highlights the importance [the Iraqis] place on being prepared to operate in a contaminated environment," one secret report states.

The obstacle courses were used as part of general Iraqi army training. "In these areas, troops are instructed to bypass or move through contaminated obstacles and perform normal combat duties while wearing protective clothing," the report notes.

"Each Iraqi division has an organic chemical company that is equipped primarily with Soviet-manufactured materiel such as the truck-mounted ARS12 and DDA53 decontamination apparatus," an intelligence report states. "As in the Soviet Army, the Iraqi ground force has a chemical branch, and CBR doctrine is most likely based on Soviet concepts."

Before relations with the Kremlin cooled following Hussein's crackdown on Iraqi communists in 1978, the Soviets reportedly supplied small amounts of chemical warfare agents for training use.

The Iraqis had "no known chemical warfare production capability, although the technological base required to produce nerve agent exists, and an attempt has reportedly been made to do so," according to an intelligence analysis. It concludes ominously:

"The Iraqis realize that, once acquired, weapons of this type could be

used against . . . potential adversaries, such as Iran and Israel. Numerous weapons systems already in the Iraqi inventory are capable of delivering CBR munitions, which would have to be externally supplied."

Intelligence sources told my associate Dale Van Atta that the French, who replaced the Russians as Iraq's major military supplier, have not provided chemical weapons. But the Iraqis have built up a small stockpile on their own.